

We must rekindle the traditional spirit

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Editor's note: This is the third in a series of articles based on a thesis, "A Cultural-Relevant Curriculum in the Education of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors Working with Alaska Natives," by Ernest J. Turner. Turner, an Athabaskan from Holy Cross, is the director of the Alaska Native Alcoholism Recovery Center in Anchorage.

OPINION

Den Nena Henash
Our Land Speaks

Alaska Natives have used a variety of philosophies and methodologies during the last two decades to battle the disease of alcoholism. Most of the grassroots efforts came about through the recovering alcoholics themselves.

These alcoholics, for the most part, recovered through the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Their ability to maintain abstinence was living proof that Natives could recover from alcoholism and that AA could be instrumental in this endeavor. When money for treatment became available, most of the programs adopted the 12-step methodology as their program philosophy.

While many Natives were recovering through the program of AA, a spiritual movement toward sobriety was started in the Native traditional area. Several spiritual retreats were held, using traditional religious practices, which strongly advocated sobriety through the use of ceremonies which endorse the values and beliefs of the cultural system.

These two distinct approaches to treatment both rely on the individual's contact with a source of power for recovery. Both are designed to effect changes in the individual rather than in the community.

But, both of the recovery processes depend on advocates from members of the community for support. Many of the Natives, whether in the AA program or in the traditional camp, acknowledged that cultural identity and cultural conflicts in their value system and the indifferent attitude in the community interfered in their recovery.

They further complained that most counselors in the facilities where they received treatment did not understand their unique customs, values and needs. Many times they were asked to participate in activities that were against their beliefs.

If these findings are true, the implications for strengthening the treatment activities through training become of paramount importance.

In 1976, P.L. 94-437, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, was passed by Congress. Contained within the provisions of this act were the first official authorizations for the Indian Health Service to include alcoholism treatment and prevention in its activity.

The primary goal and objectives are:

Goal:

The branch will attempt to lower the incidence and prevalence of alcohol abuse and alcoholism among American Indians and Alaska Natives to a level at or below that of the general population in the United States within a 15-year period.

There is a lot science does not understand about the disease of alcoholism, but it is apparent that the disease is devastating to Alaska Natives. The treatment of the disease is still a comparatively new field full of controversy.

Objectives

- Guide the development of a comprehensive, effective and culturally relevant program of prevention with emphasis on Indian youth and families.

- Guide the development of a comprehensive, effective and culturally relevant network of Indian community-based treatment services for the alcoholic and his family.

Slowly the IHS began to change its focus in regard to the health demands of the Alaska Natives and American Indians.

The "IHS Alcoholism/Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative," states, "Many of the health challenges of the past are now under control: trachoma is effectively eradicated; neonatal mortality among American Indians and Alaska Natives is lower than for the rest of the U.S. population; and tuberculosis has declined dramatically.

"However, many 'new' diseases affecting American Indians and Alaska Natives demand effective disease prevention and health promotion programs.

"In 1986, IHS began a dramatic shift of resources to address these issues. . . It is a year of renewed focus on a problem that has plagued these communities for many years.

"It is a most auspicious year in the history of alcoholism/substance abuse programs serving American Indians and Alaska Natives."

Indian Health Service in Alaska for the most part tried the mental health approach to recovery. It has been 14 years since IHS embarked into the field of alcoholism treatment and prevention.

The problem in Alaska appears to have increased rather than decreased. In spite of their best efforts, IHS has failed to noticeably reduce alcoholism.

Cultural relevancy in training

Alaska alcohol treatment programs hire mostly recovering alcoholics, depending on their experience as alcoholics, to help in the recovery process. A few of these programs employ Alaska Natives merely to satisfy their funding source, to show that they are, in fact, providing culturally perceptive treatment.

Very little effort has been expended in the area of techniques to create cultural environments that are conducive for recovery, nor in facilitating change in relationships without imposing values on their clients.

In 1974, I was elected chairman of the Northwest Indian Council on Alcoholism. Our purpose was to investigate the need for, and the applicability of, a cultural-relevant approach to treatment.

We were confident that we could

develop strategy that would provide a special cultural approach to treatment. The majority of the membership believed that cultural-relevant training would be a vital component to treatment.

We managed to secure funds to start a training program specifically to train Indian alcoholism counselors. The primary emphasis of the project was to train counselors to provide treatment using culture-specific treatment techniques.

The Northwest Indian Training Institute, in my opinion, never successfully dealt with cultural relevance.

They did not provide education on American Indian history or the impact of alcoholism in Indian communities.

They did not look at the feelings of the clients in relation to their culture, what their world view was, what their important values were, what their beliefs were, what their cultural conflicts were and where and how they saw themselves in relation to society as individuals.

They did discuss Indian drinking practices and provided some information on traditional healing methods, primarily adopting the traditions of the Plains tribes.

In 1978 the Alaska Native Commission on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse adopted the curriculum of the Northwest Indian Training Institute. They imported many of the healing methods of the Plains tribes as well.

Neither institute lasted for any length of time. The primary problem was that the locus of control was externally oriented. That did little to close the social distance between the counselors and clients.

Traditional education

Education in the communities is as native to Alaska as its Native people.

Traditionally, the Native was educated within his or her own group, assuring the survival of traditional culture, belief, values, language and tribe. They have educated their youth through tradition which was, and is yet today, taught by the village elders.

In 1978 Thomas Thompson published "The Schooling of Native American" in which he wrote, "Contrary to popular belief, education — the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and skills — did not come to the North American continent on the *Nina*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria*."

"We Native Americans have educated our youth through a rich oral tradition, which was — and is today — transmitted by the elders of the tribe."

The "old ways" of the Natives were highly evolved and display a refinement that is only beginning to emerge in Alaska today. Native society has been based upon the salvation of the tribe.



Ernest J. Turner

It is still possible to take advantage of the opportunities of self-government according to the characteristics of the environment. We must elect strong leaders at the local level.

Perhaps the most immediate, pressing problem in the area of education today is how to correct and reverse the discouraging history of failure to acknowledge the uniqueness of the people.

"The whole education process must be recognized as fundamentally different when one passes from white society to Indian society. Education in white society appears to be a creator of communities. It is oriented toward the production of income-producing skills," according to "The Schooling of Native American" by Thomas Thompson in 1978.

In the traditional settings, environment is the producer of education. Every culture has provided a way of preparing its young to live within the customs of that culture, to understand and live by its values and to become a collective member of that culture.

In Native lore this process began before birth, continued through infancy and early childhood and followed chronological stages into adulthood.

It would appear then, in our quest for cultural relevancy in training it would be easier to find a foundation in the traditional life of the past than in the everyday things we do in the present.

The traditional Natives appear to have achieved ultimate heights in their spiritual life. We must find a way to rekindle the spirit.

The spiritual traditions of the environment must not be suppressed or discounted.

I believe the power of this tradition will break the pattern of destruction so prevalent in today's culture. The central lesson to be learned is who you really are. It might help us find out who we are today.

There is a lot science does not understand about the disease of alcoholism, but it is apparent that the disease is devastating to Alaska Natives. The treatment of the disease is still a comparatively new field full of controversy.

Alcohol-addiction educators cannot fully agree on alcoholism causations or successful approaches, let alone the need for cultural relevance in alcohol studies.

However, I believe a cultural-relevant approach to counseling, treatment and prevention of alcoholism should include not only state-of-the-art technology on the disease of alcoholism, but also information to help us understand where the Native is in his or her evolution, whether it is in the village or the city.